

## CREATING SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT MEETINGS

By

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The main purpose of parent-involvement programs is to have parents actively engaged in their children's educational development. Studies have shown that when parents are involved, student achievement improves (Clark, 1983; Comer 1980; Dornbusch, 1986; Henderson, 1981). Throughout the history of the United States educational system, parents have been involved with schools (Connors & Epstein 1995), and current national education goals have stressed the importance of parents and families in children's learning. However, the way parents have been involved has changed and is continuing to change over time (Connors & Epstein, 1995). Changes in parental involvement are a result of the shift away from tight family and community control of children's schooling to a significant separation of roles of families and schools to the emergence of productive partnerships between them (Connors & Epstein, 1995). Schools play a key role in the development of partnerships that promote parental involvement and benefit student achievement. Parents have a strong desire to improve their schools and to help their children achieve more than they have in the past. Parent involvement should be a special focus of any successful school, and parent meetings are an integral part of encouraging positive parent engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

### Fostering a Value in Education

The most important step to parent involvement is helping parents to value education. Successful parent involvement often hinges on employing a wide variety of

presentation methods to meet parents' needs. Foremost, parents must learn to become effective collaborators with the school. When the focus is on the value of education, a plethora of topics can be discussed in formal and informal settings. These topics can range from goal setting for students to school accountability. Strategies educators use to instill an appreciation for the value of education in parents must be as diverse as the instructional methods employed by teachers to meet the varied learning styles of the students in their classrooms. Chart A shows strategies schools can use to encourage parents to feel comfortable in school environments.

### CHART - A

#### Creating with Parents a Value for Education

##### "Community Speakers"

When a person from the community comes to speak to parents, this not only creates ownership but also empowers both the parents and the community contact.

The purpose of community speakers also:

- Provides role models for parents and students
- Motivates parents to become involved in the community
- Initiates a clearer understanding of the community surrounding the school community.
- Boost moral and parents can meet other parents at this time
- Reduces barriers and encourages positive bridges with parents and the community.

## “Town Socials”

Provide informal settings to have instructional conversations with parents about simple themes issues. Use the gym or an outdoor play area.

## “Coffee and Cake”

This could be an informal setting to discuss curriculum. The school could separate into grade levels or make it a general overview of the meaning of a curriculum plan.

Discussing curriculum with parents should only be done as a school's path in educating students is changing.

## “Snacks and Facts”

This could be an informal setting to discuss certain facts about the school. Items such as demographics of the school, number of students and number of teachers, school board representatives, district information and school's academic progress. Sharing the school's telephone and FAX numbers is one way to contact with parents. Discussing facts with parents helps them become familiar with school environment, which results in a positive ownership.

## “Value of Education”

Parents will benefit from knowledge about the school. Parents can understand rules better when they value education. Parents need to know that the school is a source of information and they can come with any concern.

## “Parent Meeting Strategies”

Teach parents how to conference with teachers. Many times parents have a conference and do not know what to ask. Parents will begin to value education at an astonishing rate if we teach them, for example, what assessment means.

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## Cultivating Parent Partnerships

Some parents expect the school to satisfy their curiosity concerning the smallest details of school functions. One faction of parents who, because of their own unpleasant

experiences, must be nurtured into establishing an initial positive relationship with school personnel. Increasing parents' appreciation for the value of education, linking parents to the school community in a meaningful way, and instilling a love of education within these stakeholders become tasks for all school personnel, not just the teacher and principal.

Presenting to parents without regard to stereotypes based on socio-economic status is essential to effective parent involvement meetings. Parents must be a part of the school regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level. Creating within them a love of education is the byproduct of well-planned parent involvement activities.

When parent leaders along with school district personnel form a partnership to increase student achievement, they bridge the gap between the culture at home and the learning environment. As parents become familiar with the school setting, dramatic changes begin to take place. An example of promoting parent empowerment is a simple course in communication at the beginning of the year. Parents often do not have the background to ask the right questions when talking to school personnel. Communication training utilizing role-play will encourage parent participation and give them the skills they need to be an important part of the school community.

When parents are treated as partners and are given relevant information by people with whom they are comfortable, they overcome hesitation and become involved. To have long lasting gains for students, parent involvement activities must be well-planned, inclusive, and comprehensive. Chart B defines activities that help connect schools and parents as partners. When parents represent various cultural groups, schools must be particularly attentive to meeting their needs. Chart C provides recommendations to assist schools in recognizing cultural differences.

## CHART - B

### Cultivating Parent Relationships

#### "Role Play"

This can be done with role play activities.

1. The parents can pretend as they are the administrators and or office staff.
2. The parents can role play a parent conference with a student who is doing well.

Role play must be only for volunteers who want to participate. Parents will discover that the communication is respected at the school.

#### "Benefits Brainstorm"

Gather parents in a meeting room. Have them write or discuss the benefits of education. The purpose is to create a value of education in parents. It is vital for parents to hear the many benefits that come from a school.

#### "You Just Never Know Until You Know"

This activity is important because parents need to know each other. Giving them time to visit and share their work places is essential to a positive school climate. They can also share information about where they live. Knowing other parents in their neighborhoods could address a safety issue.

#### "Introductions"

Introducing parents to other parents, staff, and teachers should take place at all times.

A kind and simple introduction validates both parties and creates a bridge necessary for a trusting relationship. The little simple step of teaching parents how to introduce themselves is fun and so much will be learned about the parents.

#### "Internet Cafe"

Due to the cost of Internet services, offer parents a time with certified personnel to use the school's computer lab. This will help parents learn about computers.

#### "Hands On"

Have parents work collectively on a small canvas. This y

artwork can bring together many talents. Organize parents in small groups and give each group a small canvas. They would be able to come up in a cooperative manner a drawing that would represent education.

## CHART - C

### Highlighting Cultural Differences

#### "Cultural Invitations"

The children should create invitations for an upcoming parent meeting. Each invitation should represent different cultural characteristics. Parents can make presentations about their experiences with education.

#### "Express Yourself Culturally"

Parents can express themselves at a parent fest where they can set up tables with elements of their own cultural. Sharing creates an atmosphere of understanding. Ask parents to bring food representing their family's background for a potluck supper prior to a parent meeting.

#### "Cross Cultural Experiences"

Parents can share how they have felt when they have come or gone to another country.

Only a brief description is needed because this will start a positive sharing session. When parents feel that they are on common ground, schools begin tapping on the door of success for their children. Parents have to see that the school enjoys diversity and culture and it is not just a one time event.

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Teachers and staff have responsibilities in forming parent partnerships. An offhand remark or a teacher being rude just one time can cause ill feelings among families. Schools should take time to train their personnel to be sensitive to their consumers. Chart D describes activities that will facilitate parent/school relationships, because school personnel understand parents as consumers.

## CHART - D

### Creating an understanding that parents are consumers

#### "First Impressions"

A first impression is lasting and office staff must understand the importance of having a parent feeling welcomed to the school. If a parent has to wait more than 10 minutes before someone asks, "May I help you?" that could have a negative lasting impression. All parents must be asked, "Have you been helped?". This can be done by all staff members.

#### "Climate of Kindness"

This type of climate has to be modeled. Kindness is a great word and can be used to understand many people and situations. During this parent meeting you can discuss scenarios where kindness makes a difference. Parents often have obstacles and kindness creates a trust with the school.

#### "Follow up"

All parent concerns must be followed up with a phone call or informal contact. The power of follow up is vital. Parents feel a sense of closure when they receive a phone call following up on any situation.

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### Recognizing Parent Needs

The greatest challenge in schools is the constant change in the surrounding community and the resulting frequent change in the school culture. Allowing students into the community for fieldwork, exploration, and service and bringing the community into schools are strategies that secure the parent/school relationship. Field trips are often used in a variety of curriculum studies. Inviting parents to accompany a class field trip allows them to become excited and interested in education. Similarly, outside experts are frequently brought into the classroom to speak with students and parents.

### Developing Parent Loyalty

Creating parent loyalty in a challenging community must involve a two-way outreach. Children have many after-school programs, but providing meaningful experiences for parents and children in the community will have a lasting effect, with intrinsic rewards for both parents and children. Parents, teachers, and students are all learners together. Community-based projects generate interest, while developing needed resources for local citizens. Chart E describes strategies for enhancing parent loyalty.

## CHART - E

### Supporting Parent Loyalty

#### "Business Communities"

Invite local business to talk to parents. Local businesses are vital to the school community. Local businesses depend on the community to keep their business going.

#### "Local Politicians"

Since voting is important in our communities, parents like to see politicians speaking at the school. The meeting does not have to be long because when parents see this person on TV or in the newspaper he or she will say, "Wow, that person was at my child's school".

#### "Teacher Presentations"

One strong resource can be the teachers in the school. Asking teachers to do a 45 minute presentation on a particular lesson is valuable. Parents are always interested in the teacher and the delivery of a lesson will create a stronger bond. Watching a teacher teach is an eye-opener for parents.

#### "Feedback"

Having sessions for parents to give feedback on certain events, situations, or community efforts fosters a solid connection between schools and families. Feedback for an upcoming event is helpful prior to a scheduled activity.

Feedback for a past event is also invaluable. Having parent perspectives is important in all situations.

## "Parent Teamwork"

Parents need to be on school-wide committees. Some parents will feel empowered when they are a part of the attendance committee. Parents often do not know the workings of a school until they sit in a meeting. One parent commented, "I did not know that it took so much to understanding school budgets".

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## Summary

Teaching children and parents to give back to the community is a task that has important hidden benefits. Taking schools into the community creates a foundation of support, we need to educate our families and students. Parents know that they want the best for their children, and academic success creates opportunities for success in life. When schools include the themes of creating a value in education, cultivating parent partnerships, highlighting cultural differences, creating an understanding that

parents are consumers, and supporting parent loyalty, they are creating sensitive environments.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Laverne Warner is a retired Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Language, Literacy & Special Populations at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. She is a Past President of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (1995-1997) and recently served on the Board of Directors for the Southern Early Childhood Association (2001-2004).



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Dr. John M. Barrera as a regional director, of Houston Independent School, believes that in order to create developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and effective learning environment the school must have collaboration with family and community. This collaboration is necessary to promote resilience, social competence and coping skills, respect, and social support for self and others.

His doctoral research focused on techniques of effective parent involvement in education. His current interests are centered on the educational development of children living in urban neighborhoods, taking into account environmental influences of family, school, and community.



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He received his BBA and MEd from the University of St. Thomas, Houston Texas. He earned his doctorate in Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. In addition to being principal at Las Americas Education Center, He serve as adjunct faculty member for University of St. Thomas and Sam Houston State University. Currently, He is the regional director for the west region in Houston ISD.

